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We were never cool: Investigating knowledge production and discourses of cool in the sociology of music

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Abstract

This article examines knowledge production in the sociology of music. Focusing on the idea of cool music, we interrogate the nature of music researchers' relationship with their object of research. While the qualification and connotation of cool is widespread in popular music, sociology has largely neglected to engage with it as an object of research. Instead, the sociological investigation of music audiences is divided between two opposed but co-constructed paradigms that ultimately do not account for how cool emerges as a qualifier and connotation, how it performs as a discourse on music, and to what effect. Using the example of aging music researchers as a departure point, we examine how the cool connotations of music function as a mode of discourse that legitimates particular knowledge, practice, and taste, demarcating insider/outsider status. We explore how music acquires social connotations such as "cool" and whether that alters music researchers' approaches to it. We argue that apart from the disclosure of inclinations, social characteristics, and relationships to the object of research (music scenes, preferences, fandom, and so on), the tradition of reflexive empirical perspectives in music sociology should incorporate further deconstruction of the *transformative* dimensions in the relations between music and researcher. Music, as a complex and dynamic object,

thus, requires sociology to produce accounts that both encompass people's enjoyment and experience as well as its boundary-defining capacity.

KEYWORDS
aging, cool, insider, cultural sociology, knowledge production, music research, music sociology, youth

1 | INTRODUCTION

The idea of "cool" is often used to frame a generational divide—if not conflict—that is believed to define and separate the cultural aspirations and practices between younger and older audiences (Pountain & Robins, 2000; see also Liu, 2004). The realm of popular music does not escape discourses about cool (and in opposition, its uncool counterparts). Yet, researchers tend to either take it at face-value and describe its mobilization uncritically within music scenes or disregard it altogether. Instead, research on popular music[1] has been generally underpinned for a long time by two intertwined assumptions: first, that music is primarily the domain of youth (see Bennett, 2008; Frith, 1983). On that note, Middleton (1990) showed how youth as a category was prioritized in the study of popular music at the expense of understanding how older people also participate in a variety of music in different ways. Implicitly, youth[2] becomes the demographic *in the know*, or with the knowledge about trendy and cool music. The second assumption is that a structural homology exists between music genres and the social classes of their audiences (see Atkinson, 2011; Rimmer, 2012; Willis, 1978). Music then acquires its meaning and connotations on the basis of the audiences' social belongings. Class demographics here determine the type of music that is consumed and, by homological association, its level of cultural legitimacy. Based on these two assumptions in the field, the question is whether the discourses and connotations that are attached to certain popular music forms emerge from either the age or the social class of music culture participants.

Scholarship in music sociology has begun to destabilize these taken-for-granted assumptions; first, by exploring the significance of music for aging audiences (Bennett, 2013; Hodkinson, 2013; Taylor, 2010), and second, by highlighting how everyday music listening practices intersect a range of individual and collective meaning-making practices beyond the scope of age or class belonging (see—among others—Bennett, 1999; DeNora, 2000; Hennion, 2009). The musical object is thus opening up through such scholarship and proving to be quite complex and uncertain. Epistemologically speaking, we contend that there are two paradigms (framed here as pragmatist and structuralist) that attempt to identify the status, meaning, and value of music. Empirical research is usually deployed to answer such questions. Both paradigms co-construct one another but we note that oppositions in the conceptual approaches to music often appear futile inasmuch as both paradigms fail to address the question as to how a connotation like cool not only emerges, but also operates with particular discursive features and functions. Moreover, researchers from the sociology of music seldom reflect upon their own relationship to the field, and therefore, consider social connotations like cool, except for a brief if underdeveloped research note by Beer (2009). Cool as a concept is rather relegated to a methodological dichotomy between an insider status (that allows the researcher to be *in the know*) and an outsider status (whereby the researcher is unable to know what "cool music" is). As we further elaborate in the body of the article, we define cool as a mode of discourse within the social life of music that is empirically observable as a complex set of relations, practices, and self/other knowledge, which are contingent upon the particular context of its emergence and negotiation of its meaning. We therefore aim to address a gap by offering an epistemological and methodological discussion of how music sociologists *ought* to situate themselves toward the social connotations of music.

In this article, we interrogate knowledge production in the sociology of music by focusing on the notion of cool. As an important social connotation of music, the idea and phenomenon of cool questions both how sociologists conceptualize and negotiate the meaning and value of music (what is cool/uncool), and the way in which this is contingent upon their own empirical negotiations of the music field through their insider/outsider positioning and access. We argue that apart from the disclosure of inclinations, social characteristics, and relationships to the object of research (music scenes, preferences, fandom, and so on), the tradition of reflexive empirical perspectives in music sociology should incorporate further deconstruction of the *transformative* dimensions in the relations between music and researcher, and thus, how music changes people (researchers) and how research changes how one understands and experiences music. As such, we are not advancing a theoretical rapprochement between the entrenched positions adopted in music sociology. By examining the idea and phenomena of cool in music, we are reminded of how complex an object music is and that the critical issue for music sociologists (including ourselves) is to account for the different dynamics that constitute its meaning and status. A consideration of these trajectories and the changing object-researcher relations—framed through the insider/outsider debate in sociology—enables researchers to avoid the pitfalls associated with either a celebration of music or a critical perspective that neglects the autonomy of music. The first section explores the notion of "cool" as a social connotation of music and investigates its emergence. The second section develops and focuses on the two paradigms that often emerge in the sociology of music and critically assesses issues of knowledge production in both. Finally, the third section examines how researchers have positioned themselves in relation to "cool" and defends an argument in favor of the pursuit of a reflexive approach to popular music in sociology that includes consideration of the transformation of the researcher and their object of study.

2 | INTERROGATING COOL

The phenomenon of cool has not only shaped questions of identity, style, and consumption in popular music, but also its wider conceptual influence is relevant to how diverse cultural practices, social contexts, and fields of knowledge are framed and understood. Pountain and Robins (2000, p. 13) have argued that cool has gone far beyond being a performative style expressing hedonistic disaffection of a small minority of outsiders, suggesting it could be "… the new mode of individualism, an adaptation to life in postindustrial consumer democracies much as the Protestant work ethic that Max Weber described was a way of living the discipline of industrial societies." Cool is a crucial new spiritual orientation to contemporary capitalism (see also Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Liu, 2004; McGuigan, 2009). This suggests that the capacity to identify and research "cool" music involves further critical consideration of how the music researcher is considerably more bound up within these tensions than initially thought. It hints therefore to how cool operates simultaneously as an intrinsic and instrumental register of participants' self-regard and researcher/analyst self-understanding.

There are very few *detailed* methodological accounts provided of the position of music sociologists, and particularly, the ways in which social classifications such as age, gender, or class mediate their relationship to the field, and potentially *prevent* them from accessing types of music consumption. This is the problem introduced through Beer's (2009) brief consideration of his knowledge of what is "cool," but which he defines as synonymous to youth cultures. In this section, we briefly interrogate what "cool" is before questioning researchers' relationships to it.

2.1 | Cool as a discourse within the social life of music

Cool is a discursive tool to frame practices, styles, and knowledge *within* contemporary music scenes (or sites/spaces where music is consumed) as authentic and as having greater social value. Within cultural spaces defined through shared music taste, cool is used to uphold status and belonging and to signify a unique and expressive

sensibility. In this regard, the modern currency of cool can be traced to a complex set of racialized and gendered representations visible within the early 1940s U.S. jazz scene and characterized as a "self-conscious masking of emotion" that repudiated any "ritual acts of deference then required of Black Americans in public life" (Dinerstein, 2013, p. 109). For young African American men during this time, and notably jazz musicians such as Lester Young, being cool was to convey a "calm defiance" that distanced them from the "invasive white gaze" (Dinerstein, 2013, p. 109), and it defined a "certain sartorial elegance, smooth charm and self-possession" (George, 1992, p. 62).

The reification of this cool, "black" jazz performative style and demeanor has had an enduring and widespread impact on popular culture. It signified an authentic, rebellious outsider status that appealed to the racialized imaginations of disaffected white youth in postwar America searching for ways to express nonconformity, captured through the iconic social commentary about the "white negro" by Mailer (1957). The idea of cool overlaps with other signifiers used within the earlier 1940s jazz scene such as hip or hep which described being *in the know* about the scene and the music, and thus, having awareness and understanding of preferred styles, sounds, and practices. More than scene and style-based signifiers of legitimation of certain knowledge and practice, however, knowing what is cool or hip (or hep) was believed to convey the hipster as a figure in search of freedom in order to overcome the anxieties associated with what Broyard (1948) describes as the "lost generation." What was defined as authentic and provided meaning through the jazz scene was believed to capture the existential moment of setting "out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self" (Mailer, 1957). Cool therefore is a philosophically imbued idea, yet, it remains elusive inasmuch as it is recognition of one's lack of meaning and purpose without the music scene.

Cool was subsequently used to discursively frame the attitudes and style of an emergent counterculture from the 1950s (incorporating beatniks and hippies), which was opposed to the conservative values and attitudes associated with previous generations (McGuigan, 2009). Linked to this, cool was critically defined as the ideological expression of a type of rebellious consumerism that underpinned new approaches to advertising and markets from the 1960s. Frank (1997) argues that countercultural rebellion and nonconformity became the main driving force of consumerism, rather than status competition, and thus, being cool or hip became consumption's key ideological expression. On a more fundamental level, however, McGuigan argues that cool operates to legitimate the latest stage of capitalism, that is, neoliberal capitalism, and is believed therefore to mask disaffection by translating it into "acceptance and compliance" (2009, p. 1). We return to the wider significance of this below.

While cool defined the historically raced and gender-specific dimensions of a defiant pose and attitude through music, style, and cultural expression, it also produces other fault lines within music, operating as a strategy of class-based distinction within different music scenes as a "mode of differentiation from the mainstream that allows people to think of themselves as current or cutting edge through the display of taste" (Bookman, 2013, p. 68). Through this mechanism we see a number of repetitive divisions emanate across six decades of popular music between, for example, The Stones versus The Beatles, between punk and progressive or glam rock, between indie versus metal or hard rock, rap/hip-hop versus rock, and so on. However, a crucial area for the subcultural visibility of cool was established through studies of clubbing and dance audiences in the United Kingdom from the mid-1990s. This research emphasized the important role cool played in terms of conferring insider status on clubbers as legitimation of their "underground," alternative music practices, knowledge, and style as authentic (Malbon, 1999; Moore, 2003; Thornton, 1995). These studies identify how discourses of cool produce an insider perspective based on alternative forms of music knowledge legitimacy that organizes and demarcates itself from the "uncool" mainstream. More recent studies of clubbing suggest that what is valued as cool and the clubber's ability to "exercise classificatory power" around inauthentic/authentic knowledge, practice, and style is conceived through a potentially varied display of "hierarchical forms of differentiation and intersections between different socio-structural variables," not simply age and/or class (Jensen, 2006, p. 264; 259).

From this discussion, we observe that not only is cool varied and flexible, but also it takes on ideological, cultural, and economic significance as it plays a role in the reproduction of ideas about race and class and constitutes

both a critique and expression of capitalist consumer values. More specifically within the organization and experience of music, cool operates as a form of discourse that is—or should be—knowable through empirical research as a complex set of relations, practices, and self/other knowledge, which are contingent upon the particular context of its emergence and negotiation of its meaning. The next section briefly considers an example of how cool is recognized as a social connotation of music and assumed to be an inherent and ahistorical feature of youth, diminishing as one gets older. This then becomes the departure point for an examination of music as object of sociological investigation and how knowledge production of music is framed.

2.2 | Losing one's edge: Aging and cool

Pondering his diminishing capacity to do worthwhile sociological research on cool music cultures, Beer (2009, p. 1152) invokes the ideas of Mills (1959) on the conduct of sociology, and thus, how "our own life trajectories limit the parts of the social with which we might make contact" and that "different periods of our lives facilitate differing critical distances from our objects of study." At the core of his interrogation about his ability to continue carrying out music research, there is a tension between a researcher that aims to conduct research about how music is listened to and why, but who finds himself confronted by social connotations of music that prevent him from accessing the insider perspective—understood as the only possible position from which to derive access to and understanding of music cultures. Beer suggests he had reached a point in his life where he "… had come to know very little about popular music[3]" and that he was "missing a sense of what was *happening* in the music cultures themselves and what was *happening* more generally in terms of music movements, scenes and trends" (2009, p. 1153; original emphasis). Although circumspect about whether age (with changing life stages and priorities) is the direct cause of "an insurmountable *critical distance*" (p. 1154; original emphasis) that had developed between him and the music he wanted to study, he suggests that "getting older and staying cool may not be compatible" (p. 1153).

For Beer, "cool" is the most critical configuration of music's social connotations and he entangles it narrowly within conceptions of youth/age—although his age is not provided—and homologies of taste. In other words, the desire to unpack the meaning of listening practices is undermined by the discrepancies between the social position of the researcher and the potential research participants. Beer's inability to access knowledge about music cultures—only realized through reflexive consideration of his age—demonstrates how challenging he believes the study of music listening can be if not conducted from an insider perspective. Age therefore had not been a factor informing his prior approach to the study of music cultures, but it becomes the very condition that shifts perceptions of his status from insider (as in knowledgeable) to outsider, and thus, as incapable of approaching music cultures. In turn, age is objectified as denoting a set of fixed sensibilities and practices, rather than having subjective meaning and significance that is context related, especially in terms of music interest where, as we discuss below, it is not fixed by age. However, Beer's acquired outsider perspective suggests that there remains "friction" between different music tastes that emerges from the social embeddedness and connotations of music content. In this respect, despite Beer's incomplete response to the question raised through pondering his age, his provocative note can be understood as tapping into what we argue here is a far more significant concern for the sociological study of music and is thus indicative of unresolved tensions in the conceptualization of the field.

A more reflexive review of existing empirical knowledge of popular music can reconfigure the theoretical conceptualization of the sociological field of popular music. First, the assumption about age and popular music consumption that positions the researcher (as older with "uncool" taste) in opposition to the potential research participants (younger with "cool" taste) has been undermined through numerous studies that demonstrate how music retains its significance for aging audiences and how individuals reflexively negotiate their approach to music and scenes that suit their sensibility and in ways that are compatible with their other work–life priorities (see Bennett, 2013; Hodkinson, 2013; Taylor, 2010). This research builds on changing conceptions of youth in recognition of what some believe to be a more "prolonged and unpredictable" transition to adulthood as commitments

to parenting, cohabiting, marriage, and longer-term careers are delayed (Hodkinson, 2013, p. 14). In turn, this suggests that music and other leisure preferences and practices are sustained for longer periods, and therefore, not because of a "refusal of adulthood" which is simply another way of reinforcing dominant associations between youth and popular music. On the contrary, those that do take on board so-called "adult" responsibilities and are negotiating middle-age, are also more widely acknowledged to have ongoing commitments to music that they also maintain. Second, the changing dynamics in *modes* of music consumption also undermine theoretical assumptions about conflicting or exclusive music preferences based on age. Not only are musical interests shaped through exchange and shared practices between young and old in what Bennett refers to as the "generational trading of music tastes and influences" (2013, p. 124), but young people are also partly responsible for the revival of old music technologies (such as vinyl) and are seeking out and valorizing earlier music styles and artists (e.g., The Clash, Black Sabbath, and the Rolling Stones) as more authentic through digital and streaming technologies (Laughey, 2007). Using cool to frame the conflict between generations around music tastes is put under further pressure as what counts as "cool" is conceivably drawn from a more eclectic and inclusive pool of music as younger music consumers are notably more appreciative and tolerant of older generations' music experiences and tastes (Glevarec & Pinet, 2012).

Conceptually, therefore, the problematization of youth, including the changing dynamics of cultural consumption and what Bennett describes as the "new sensibilities of ageing [...] in western society" are responsible for "an increasing continuity across the generations in terms of leisure and lifestyle preferences" and are particularly evident in music (2007, p. 28). To conceptualize music consumption (as the "cool" sociological object of study) as beyond the grasp of aging researchers overlooks the empirical reality of changing forms of music consumption and listening practices. Moreover, it overlooks the possibility of producing knowledge of popular music from ethnographic studies that tend to proceed from the perspective of an "outsider," whereby "attention to [...] the lived, embodied experience of others—of those who are not like us—is its most powerful feature" (Maxwell, 2002, p. 100). However, reasserting the methodological opportunities of ethnography and debunking myths related to age and popular music are relatively straightforward discussions, the idea of cool and how it is configured in music knowledge production is more complex and elusive requiring further examination. "Cool," therefore, raises other important questions about the wider formation of legitimation and value within sociological studies of popular music. In light of an elaboration of "cool" as a complex discourse used as both a structuring device between audiences and as a source of meaning and value within the social life of music, we now problematize the tendency to reproduce opposing sociological perspectives of music's value in research. Following this, we return to the question of how the researcher, who belongs (more or less strongly) to a particular music space through their tastes and interests, locates themselves in relation to their object of study.

3 | SOCIOLOGY AND THE OPPOSING PERSPECTIVES ON THE STATUS OF MUSIC

In sociology, music is generally regarded as "not just 'good to think with', but good for thinking through" (McCormick, 2012, p. 723). However, the discipline has mainly borrowed its conceptual frameworks from other fields (Bennett, 2008; Marshall, 2011), such as popular music studies and cultural studies, in turn creating tensions within sociology about how music *ought* to be regarded. Music sociology is populated by perspectives that delineate paradigms that are co-constructed. Prior (2013) identifies the figure of Bourdieu (1984) as central to "debates" within music sociology. We go further by suggesting that two paradigms emerge—we call one *pragmatist* and the other *structuralist*—which are co-constructed through theoretical debates and oppositions. These paradigms matter because they structure music sociology as a discipline, but they also treat music - as the cultural object - quite differently. We focus here on the most influential and conspicuous accounts from

each paradigm, with the aim of identifying how they each construct a discourse on the status of music. In doing so, we note that both fail to address the critical issue of some of its dominant social connotations such as the one of cool.

3.1 | The two paradigms in music sociology

Since the 1990s, the sociology of music has increasingly drawn on empirical accounts of everyday listening practices, as well as their meanings for individuals or groups of individuals. The ground-breaking work of DeNora (2000) analyzes how individuals use the affordances of music to cognitively assist them with their everyday activities, such as exercising, studying, commuting, or with the management of their self-identity. Her sociological account is located in critical relation with Adorno's (see DeNora, 2003). Alongside DeNora and at about the same time, we find other critical interventions in the field, by the likes of—among others—Hennion (2007) who theorizes music mediations (in opposition to Bourdieu), Bennett (1999, 2004) who thinks about collective formations around music with conceptual tools such as "neo-tribe" and "scenes," and Born (2011) who highlights the various ways music materializes identities.

These accounts have in common a focus on individuals' responses to the diffusion of music within everyday spaces. Although they differ in their conceptual implications, they share a positive perspective on music, highlighting the possible personal enjoyment of experiences with music. Some of these arguments are rooted within a perceived democratization of the access to recorded music content (as defended by Hennion et al. (2000) with the CD), or within the increased privacy of listening practices (as with Bull, 2007 and the iPod). These arguments further justify the relative autonomy of music as a cultural object and the emphasis on what music *does* to individuals.

In opposition, a second paradigm emerges with influences from the sociology of Bourdieu (Prior, 2013). To scholars from this paradigm, a pragmatist approach to music potentially provides an "… overly optimistic understanding of music" (Hesmondhalgh, 2008, p. 330) by focusing on everyday life as synonymous with the mundane, subjective, and reflexive, in opposition to the "… systemic, structural processes, which are implicitly understood as unknowable, unanalysable, unthinkable" (Hesmondhalgh, 2002, p. 120). Hesmondhalgh (2008, 2013, p. 50) further deconstructs the pragmatist paradigm by arguing that "empirical sociology" runs the risk of disregarding the social makeup of audiences: "… middle-class people are able to present themselves to interviewers as rounded, musically sensitive individuals," In opposition, "It is difficult to imagine working-class people telling stories of self-realization through music in [the same] way" (2013, p. 52). Instead, music ought to be considered within social relationships.

A key tenet in the structuralist paradigm concerns the social variables that mediate the interactions with music. These variables condition *which* individuals interact with *what* content and *how*. Social class is the main culprit. For authors such as Atkinson (2011) or Rimmer (2012), music is embedded within a "structural homology": the consumption practices of individuals from different social classes replicate the social structure of a society. The content that individuals listen to is, therefore, defined by social connotations because it is classified on a spectrum of cultural legitimacy, ranging from the music that is socially depreciated and devalued to the music that is legitimate and only accessible to the social (and cultural) elite. The status of music is understood through the lens of an overarching structure of tastes.

Our division of the scholarship into two paradigms would certainly require more nuance if we had space to do so. Also, we do not wish to suggest that pragmatist theorists deny that music is (also) a social object, nor that structuralists suggest that music cannot be an enjoyable individual resource. Instead, we want to point out how different emphases are placed on the status of music, because this in turn determines knowledge production about music. The question that underpins a music sociology approach to audiences is as follows: is music first and foremost a positive resource for individuals, or is it primarily embedded within social relations that attribute social connotations to it?

The pragmatist perspective conceptualizes *internally* by accounting for the effects it has on those that listen to it. Audiences are constructed as reflexive and competent individuals (DeNora, 2000; Hennion, 2009). The status of music is constructed from a cultural perspective, which is the one held by audiences that listen to the music, because sociologists do not "arbitrate the validity of claims" made by interviewees (Martin, 1995, p. 12). In the structuralist paradigm, however, the status of music is constructed through an imposition by either a structural homology (as in Atkinson, 2011; Rimmer, 2012) or through social relationships (as in Hesmondhalgh, 2002, 2008, 2013). Music is understood *externally*, through the range of connotations (e.g., the idea of cool) that are imposed upon it by either an entire structure of cultural legitimacy or by social groups. The discourse on music here results from its embeddedness within a social structure. Music becomes a metaphor to analyze the social (see Whelan, 2014).

Both paradigms circle around similar issues, construct one another by opposition, but never seem to find common ground on the discourse on music. The pragmatists consider that "… the proper role of sociological analysis is neither to attack nor to defend any particular style of musical expression" (Martin, 1995, p. 12). There is a sense of trust in the words of research participants about the role they inscribe to music and enjoyment they experience with it. In opposition to what some see as a "dominant conception of music" (Hesmondhalgh, 2008, p. 330), the structuralists respond that participants have reasons to "… compete over who is having more fun" (Hesmondhalgh, 2008, p. 338), and therefore, a vested interest in presenting music through stories of personal enjoyment, which justifies researchers' skepticism regarding the empirical perspective. In Bourdieusian accounts (see Atkinson, 2011), there is even distrust for the words of participants because they are seen as trying to display a music taste as legitimate, which disregards the social imposition on musical meanings.

The two opposing paradigms approach the status of music as resulting either from its capacity to affect its audiences or from connotations imposed by social relationships and outside of the individual interaction with it. On the one hand, a pragmatist perspective neglects all types of connotations of music (such as cool), which orient individuals toward a type of content and/or produce what is commonly referred to as "guilty pleasures" (uncool music from which audiences do not want to admit feeling of pleasures). On the other hand, the structuralists present music as a "problem," a signifier of social and political issues, and the resulting critical discourse morally validates or invalidates certain things (see Whelan, 2014). This perspective runs the risk of deploying a "miserabilist" approach (Grignon & Passeron, 1989) toward working class audiences (or, the dominated masses) who listen to music that is deemed illegitimate. From the limitations of both paradigms, we ask in the following section how researchers (with their class, gender, age, and ethnicity) position themselves (their knowledge and taste) in relation to their object of study (music), its audiences and its social connotations.

4 | HOW COOL IS REPRODUCED IN MUSIC RESEARCH

So far, the question about the extent to which sociologists can recognize music's social connotations within their research on music audiences without reproducing incomplete/reductionist portrayals of music's meaning and value has been used as illustrative of the tensions between paradigms. This helps frame assumptions about cool as a dominant social connotation relating to music taste and also for legitimating knowledge and authentic styles *within* music scenes. We argue that the more critical set of issues pertain to how researchers negotiate the tensions that arise from the embeddedness of music (or other meaning-making cultural practices) within wider social dynamics, including the extent to which they can conduct music research without reproducing or imposing value and taste hierarchies. As a way to destabilize the dichotomy between the two paradigms in the sociology of music, which was entrenched in the 2000s, we turn to the writing of Lewis (1992) and his account of music taste as constituted by the dimensions of demographics (class, age, gender, and ethnicity), politics and esthetics. Lewis advocates that in empirical approaches to music, the connections between "social and cultural structures" is (or should be) "a question, not a given" and when studying music we should be viewing these relations as "contingent, problematic, variable and—to a higher degree than we might imagine—subjectively determined" (1992, p. 141). In

other words, the relationship of audiences with music is not simply composed by individual motives and social variables, but it is one that evolves over time and which deserves to be considered as such, as Beer's (2009) own relationship with music suggests. In fact, the increase in academic interest in the experience of aging music audiences and fans for instance can be regarded as a direct consequence of music academics getting older.

4.1 | Cool and knowledge production in music

The academic study of popular music was initially tied to the changing sensibilities and values of "baby-boomer" scholars[4] who were critically compelled to disrupt taste hierarchies enfolded within academic definitions of music in order to inscribe popular music as a "legitimate" object of study. As the study of popular music evolved it also reproduced hierarchies of taste, such as "cool" music, while ignoring "illegitimate" music (Tagg, 2000). On the one hand, researchers tacitly investigate music they are familiar with, thus, tending to develop a more positive perspective on it and to neglect the social connotations it may have for other audiences. On the other hand, adopting a critical perspective on music that researchers are outsider to runs the risk of (re)producing taste hierarchies that audiences never situate themselves in or against.

However, it is not only within the study of popular music that questions of taste and inclusion/exclusion apply. The sociology of music itself is embedded within other formations of value within a hierarchy of "cool"/"uncool" subjects where music may convey connotations of cool in opposition to other "uncool" subjects of sociological research (or vice versa). Indeed, scholars—regardless of discipline—are all embedded within value systems as they research and write about preferred topics—justified on scientific, political, or moral grounds—at the exclusion of other issues considered futile. In this sense, they reproduce values of some kind (see Weber 1904 [1949]) or overlook or exclude other routes to knowledge production. With the pressures placed on researchers in contemporary neoliberal academia (see Burrows, 2012), the tendency to research "known" objects with a "real world impact" certainly increases and with it, the tendency to conduct insider research.

The significance of this can be further understood by looking at the wider implications and meaning of cool. According to McGuigan (2009), as we noted above, cool is not only a marginal or rebellious trend, but also it is an engine of mainstream culture. Tracing its genealogical meaning and echoing the work of Boltanski and Chiapello (2005), McGuigan (2009, p. 1) argues that cool is the new spirit of capitalism and identifies a number of antecedents (narcissism, ironic detachment, and hedonism) that explain its contemporary salience including how it coalesces around ideas of individualization and self-reflexivity. Cool therefore refers to the conditions and experiences of social and professional life today (including within neoliberal academia). Within the context of music sociology, cool is not only an important social connotation of music that needs to be negotiated, but it also works concurrently as an inherent and instrumental chronicle of participant self-worth and analyst awareness—that is, it is not just about a sense of belonging to or exclusion from a music culture, but also it is a judgment of value and self-understanding more broadly. Indeed, the latter reflects traces of meaning from earlier commentary by Broyard (1948) and Mailer (1957) whereby being cool (or hip) was viewed as a mode of nonconformity for young people searching for authenticity and meaning in the postwar period of the twentieth century. From what we can infer from Beer's own musings, the selection of sites of music consumption to study is entangled within wider hierarchies of value and cultural sensibility. We argue that the social connotations of music further complicate insider/outsider knowledge within the sociological study of popular music.

4.2 | Insiderism/outsiderism in music research

The insider/outsider debate is a longstanding concern within sociological research. There have been numerous conceptual and empirical accounts of how sociologists should reflexively negotiate their relationship to the object

of study (Berger, 2015; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). The negotiation of any object of sociological investigation requires consideration of the potential implications of having or developing insider status and the type of understanding and insights that it produces. It should be an analytical question that shapes knowledge production as the study evolves, rather than an immutable and fixed barrier to knowledge at the outset. Insider perspectives are clearly important for music sociologists to gain access to and be able to research music and style-based scenes (see Bennett, 2002, p. 452; Nowak & Haynes, 2018). Beyond the disclosure of affiliations with scenes and questions about the relevance of shared social characteristics, the implications of this for the contours of music knowledge production are seldom critically reflected upon in any depth (besides Bennett, 2002; Hesmondhalgh, 2005; Hodkinson, 2005; Maxwell, 2002). There are however several critically reflexive accounts primarily from feminist scholars negotiating their gendered identities and questions of insiderism/outsiderism given the propensity for many music scenes to be male-dominated (e.g., Cohen, 1993; Downes, 2012; Hill, 2016; Leonard, 2007).

The acknowledgment of the worthiness of music often infers a celebratory account of the diffusion of music within the social (Hesmondhalgh, 2008). Celebratory accounts of music largely result from a form of methodological bias that is sometimes not fully acknowledged whereby the shift from being an "insider" to becoming an "insider researcher" (Hodkinson, 2005, p. 136) is not reflected upon. In contrast, outsider perspectives on music tend to use it to convey criticisms of the social and political order (Whelan, 2014). However, there are exceptions that negotiate credible "outsider" insights into the meaning, role and value of music without privileging or problematizing participants' understanding at the outset. Despite not explicitly defining what a hip-hop "insider" is or should be—"I was a complete outsider when it came to hip-hop" (2002, p. 104)—Maxwell explores "how the relationship to the object of our investigations affect the kinds of knowledges we generate" (2002, p. 103). Drawing on Born's (1995) critical reflections of knowledge produced from her ethnographic approach to the field as an outsider, Maxwell (2002, p. 111, emphasis in original) suggests such an approach provides "a means of discerning between a conscious discourse *about* a field and a less conscious discourse *within* a field." For Born, being an outsider means moving "beyond," "behind," and "across" the discourse of music participants in order to both "trace its embeddedness in certain historical and contemporary social and cultural formations" and to clarify the meaning of "its gaps and contradictions" thereby providing analysis of "forces that are not readily perceivable by those subjects" (1995, p. 10). In other words, an ethnographic approach that assumes an "outsider" perspective produces knowledge as explanation, and thus, beyond what is lived and experienced within the music culture. We would advocate that a similar framing of knowledge production should apply regardless of whether the researcher positions themselves initially as "outsider" or "insider" in relation to the musical object of investigation, noting that such relations are often difficult to classify as "inside" or "outside."

Age remains a rather curiously underexplored insider/outsider tension for music researchers given the enduring assumptions about popular music and its association with youth. Beer's (2009) critique of the ways to overcome the problems of access to and knowledge of "cool" music (outsiderism) because of his age, however, further demonstrates the ambiguous status of insider knowledge in music research. Proposing that aging researchers employ younger researchers (as "insiders") to identify what is "cool," and therefore, research-worthy (as Beer, 2009 argues) not only valorizes an insider perspective, but it also reproduces a false dichotomy of insider/outsider relations that does not reflect the complex nexus of experiences and positionings of researchers and the researched. Another research option considered by Beer (2009, p. 1156) is to embrace that which is uncool. However, this simply accentuates the epistemological and methodological problem at the heart of this paper concerning the reproduction of boundaries.

Insider/outsider positions are never fixed in research, nor are objects of research. Existing forms of social and cultural embeddedness alongside configurations of sameness/difference of researcher/researched and shifting levels of intimacy generate the power dynamics that invariably shape the research process and production of knowledge (Nowak & Haynes, 2018). Aging may influence insider/outsider relations, but not independently of other social and cultural characteristics, nor of the constant evolution of the musical object. The process of reflexivity requires consideration of the ways in which both music as sociological object and our relations to it are

transformed within and by the research process. Thus, in addition to disclosing one's musical preferences, scene membership or social identity, researchers should recognize insider/outsider boundaries as complex, blurred, and dynamic. In his questioning, Beer (2009) therefore makes a step in the right direction, however, music and its "cool" social connotations remain narrowly conceived and fixed. Because cool is contextually produced and mobilized as a discourse around music and within the social life of music, it is knowable through observation and analysis, not the other way around. Positing cool/uncool as a priori objects of study (in the way Beer does) reproduces the same ambiguities that are present in other music research because the transformative elements of the research process—the object-researcher relations—are not explicitly accounted for in theoretical analysis.

4.3 | Disclosing one's position in the field

The value in recognizing and implementing the fundamental methodological principles we have outlined above is what doing "worthwhile social research" is all about according to Silverman, who highlights "issues of principle that cut across both methodological and theoretical issues" (2013, p. xiv). The existing tension that emerges in the sociology of music would be diffused if differences in empirical approaches to audiences are considered. The insider/outsider perspective should not determine whether or not researchers engage with said cultures (be they "cool" or "uncool"), nor what they conclude about them. Surely, the critical distance is an imperative for the discipline that goes beyond different empirical methods. In light of this tension that characterizes the field, we would advocate for researchers to continue to engage in reflexive accounts as to *where* they speak from (in a similar fashion to Beer, 2009), but with more detailed and theoretical grounding that acknowledges the evolving trajectories of researchers, participants, and their object (music). This would provide greater methodological and theoretical transparency about the specific transformations of both music as the object of their investigation and themselves. Instead of preemptively considering music as cool or uncool and disclosing who they are, including their preferences, music sociologists ought to better deconstruct the wider entanglement and transformation of their relations in the field in order to reflect upon how it mediates their access to music cultures and approach to different music content. One instance of how this can be done is the research conducted on male musicians' mistreatments of women (Strong & Rush, 2018, p. 577) that ends with the authors' recommendation that future scholarship should "… always include an acknowledgement of what artists have done, although this does not preclude a positive assessment of their work in other ways."

We are in alignment with Hesmondhalgh as he writes that:

> Many intellectuals who are rightly critical of existing social relations enjoy and gain enrichment from artistic and cultural experience in their own lives. […] But they seem unable or unwilling in what they write and say to provide an account of how art, culture, entertainment, and knowledge might enhance people's lives more generally, and why these domains might need defending from the kind of denigration and lack of public support … (2013, p. 4)

Music and culture is something that researchers participate in (and sometimes contribute to) as they conduct their research. In this sense, researchers are already embedded within the tension between culture as autonomous and as social processes. In that regard, we contend that it is not so much about the "status" of culture as much as it is about how "we" as sociologists frame, approach, access, treat, contemplate, and derive understanding from it. As we note above, empirical research is a process and it is one that is transformative for both the researcher (knowledge production as well as the potential for personal/moral reflexivity) and their object of study (its meaning). Research interventions have transformed popular music as mere theoretical abstraction to something that is more complexly situated within an emergent connotation of social worlds. However, unless our abstractions about music are sensitive to experience in everyday life, and thus, understand "how people are embedded within the social milieux that they

inhabit" and "how they shape and are influenced by actions," the risk is that we produce "a 'third version' of events that is explicable neither in terms of the subjectivity of the analyst, nor that of the subject herself" (May & Perry, 2011, p. 30).

The account of the status and role of music in people's lives we are advocating, therefore, is not about offering a specific theoretical rapprochement between the opposing perspectives we discussed earlier.[5] Instead, we want to encourage further consideration of the fundamental dimensions of reflexivity and how researchers conceptualize and negotiate the intertwinement of music and the social, given how the dominant approaches to music discussed above are unable to comprehensively account for how cool emerges and the role it plays without considering the opposing perspective.[6] As such, May and Perry (2011, p. 35) offer a useful reminder about the social aspects of knowledge and how

> the efforts involved in mediating between constitutive and contextual values can so easily be lost, leaving not the work of understanding, but instead those who shout across chasms informed by a positioning and process that has long since ceased to be an object of investigation taken forward into practice.

We want to conclude by highlighting how music is an object of research that presents sources of individual enjoyment as well as delineating spheres of value. A critical issue for music sociologists consists of accounting for the *internal* and *external* dynamics that all contribute to consolidate the meaning of music, and without falling into the trap of reductionism, either through a discourse on individual affects or through a reading by class.

5 | CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have questioned how music sociologists develop a conceptual and empirical relationship with their object of research. We note that knowledge production in the discipline tends to reproduce particular boundaries, for instance, around the notion of "cool" associated with certain music. We have also reviewed how some of the most prominent theorists in music sociology such as Bennett, DeNora, Hennion, and Hesmondhalgh have attempted to critically consider—to a greater or lesser extent—the social connotations of music and sought to illuminate not only where the different conceptualizations stand, but also where there is space for different appreciations for music's value—be it social, cultural, or use. This paper has aimed to destabilize some established, if taken for granted, ideas about music and its social and cultural associations by music sociologists, specifically, that cool enacts a separation between audiences and researchers that are "in" and those that are "out," when in fact we argue that cool itself should be the object of sociological investigation. By interrogating "cool" as an important dynamic within methodological questions about the relations between the object of investigation (music) and the researcher's own subjectivity—beyond age—we extend the critical appraisal of the development of knowledge production in popular music and its inadvertent alignment with the reproduction of certain music as "cool." We argue that regardless of whether one perceives themselves as a "cool" insider or not with respect to music scenes, the pursuit of knowledge should extend beyond explanations of what is directly lived and experienced within the scene and without reducing its meaning and significance to social variables.

The co-construction of two paradigms in the sociology of music—which we have named pragmatist and structuralist—results largely in the entrenchment of strong positions regarding the status attributed to music: does it emanate from individuals' enjoyment with it or from the imposition of social connotations onto it? In order to understand the beliefs, meanings, and interactions that "real" people have regarding music within a range of contexts, researchers should continue to be critically reflexive about how they empirically approach music as an object of study, as well as its audiences, but with greater critical emphasis on deconstructing the transformation of their own relations to, and complex entanglement within, the music field. In this regard, researchers constitute

the missing link within disciplinary discussions regarding the tension between culture as autonomous and culture as a social process.

Furthermore, we have acknowledged the importance of both the meaning-focused and structural/social elements in approaches to music. Indeed, as we have shown, there is no elaboration of the phenomenon of cool, nor satisfactory sociological analysis of it, without incorporating both elements. We also maintain the importance of adopting a multidimensional approach to music and culture more broadly. In this regard, we stress that sociologists need to extend their reflexive consideration of their music tastes along both those inherent (our preferences given who we are) and external (our part in endorsing some people/cultures opposed to others) dimensions. Finally, Beer's musings provided an opportunity to clarify the relationship between "cool" and the aging researcher. We conclude that the potentially diminished capacity to identify and access "cool," research-worthy music because of the changing social dynamics of aging, misrepresents the discursive role that the notion of cool plays in the social life of popular music. Thus, as (young or old) sociologists, *we were never cool* because, as we have argued, age is not the arbiter of cool and youth is not the only category of people with a stake in music and our role as researchers is not to be part of such musical connotations. Rather "cool" music and "being cool" are inextricably tangled up within the social connotations and values produced through music and research on music as an object (and more widely), about which researchers must remain critical.

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ENDNOTES

[1] In this paper, "music" and "popular music" are analytically distinct categories, although when discussing the sociology of music this includes popular music as a subcategory within the wider field. The main analytical distinction between them derives from how the term "music" functions as a more neutral and inclusive term compared to the often ideologically loaded term "popular," which is known to have a number of differing interpretations all of which accept that modernism and capitalism have key roles in its formation.

[2] The specific meaning of being "young" or "old" within the context of popular music research is seldom articulated in an objective sense although Bennett (2006) recruits and describes "older" punk fans in his research as between 35 and 53 years old. Within our discussion, the concepts of "young" and "old" are understood as relational, intersubjective terms that are empirically observed to frame perceived generational differences within and around music participation and taste.

[3] It is not clear what is meant by popular music here. Insisting that it is harder to know and study popular music as he grows older may suggest a narrow understanding as chart music or music associated with alternative scenes, rather than a wider definition incorporating jazz, blues, and country for instance.

[4] These scholars include Phillip Tagg, Franco Fabbri, Simon Frith, David Horn, and Richard Middleton.

[5] See how Darmon (2015, p. 20) draws on Weber to "account for art from a social perspective without neutralizing it."

[6] Moreover, discussions about reflexivity are often restricted to methodological textbooks, rather than elaborated fully in accounts of research praxis.

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